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Excavation and Survey at *Aeclanum* in 2018 (Comune di Mirabella Eclano, Provincia di Avellino, Regione Campania)

Girolamo F. De Simone and Ben Russell

Between 2017 and 2018, the University of Edinburgh and Apolline Project team at *Aeclanum* concentrated on three main activities: 1) the continuation of excavations in the area of the baths and the theatre; 2) new excavations across the line of the Via Appia and on the northern side of the forum (which was identified by GPR in 2017); 3) new GPR survey to the east of the forum. As in 2017, the project is a collaboration with the Soprintendenza per le provincie di Salerno ed Avellino, the Comune di Mirabella Eclano, the British School at Rome, the Accademia di Belle Arti di Napoli and the Università degli Studi del Sannio at Benevento, and involves specialists from Italy, the UK, Canada, the Czech Republic, the USA, Australia and Japan (for background on the site, see De Simone and Russell 2018).

Excavations in the theatre and the baths:

In 2017, excavations close to the entrance of the archaeological park confirmed that the structure partially uncovered 2006 and 2009 was the city's theatre, rather than a nymphaeum, as had previously been supposed. The architectural decoration of the building suggests it was constructed in the 1st century AD (Mesisca, Lazzarini and Salvadori 2013; Mesisca 2015) and this date is broadly confirmed by ceramic data from its foundations. The architecture that survives comprises entablature elements in Luna marble and sections of column shafts in *cipollino* and *breccia di Settebassi*. These components must have belonged to the *scaenae frons* and indeed the re-identification of the structure as a theatre also provides a plausible context for the torso of an imperial statue, previously proposed to be Marcus Aurelius but now dated to the reign of Domitian (Fig.1), which was found in the excavations in 2007 (Avagliano 2017). The lavish marble decoration of the *scaenae frons* extended to the area of the *orchestra*, from where the new excavations have recovered substantial quantities of *giallo antico*, *cipollino*, *portasanta pavonazzetto*, and *africano* revetment. The dimensions of the theatre suggest it was capable of seating somewhere in the vicinity of 3-4,000 people.

In 2018, excavation work in the theatre focused on three bays of the substructures of the *cavea*, on the north-western edge of the building. Here some important insights into the later history of the theatre were revealed. Although this area was highly disturbed by spoliation activity, a series of occupation layers were identified in the central and southern ones of these bays. In the central bay, at least three occupation layers built up directly on top of the original preparation surface, stripped of its paving, of the interior of the space. The highest of these layers consisted of compact red-brown clay containing large quantities of charcoal, other evidence of burning and a range of domestic ceramics datable to the mid to late 5th century AD (notably ARS (Hayes 61B, 74 and 84), as well as local cooking wares). A similar deposit was found in the southernmost bay, but here it was covered by a primary volcanic deposit consisting of coarse ash beneath more finely stratified ash. This same volcanic deposit, reaching depths of at least 29 cm, was found outside the bays, to the west of the theatre. The fact that it was not found in the central bay indicates that this space was closed off, presumably by doors, when the ash fell. These volcanic deposits can be connected with the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 472 and so provide a closely dated *terminus ante quem* for the occupation deposits within the theatre (on this eruption, Rolandi, Munno, and

Postiglione 2004). Further volcanic deposits were excavated in the drain running around the perimeter of the *orchestra* of the theatre, though in this case they were washed here from the interior of the *cavea* as part of secondary processes. Between 2006 and 2009 comparable volcanic deposits were found in the area of the stage building, showing that the *scaenae frons* had been dismantled by AD 472.

The new results from the theatre show that at some point prior to AD 472 the complex had gone out of use, lost its stage building, and was already being stripped of its paving. The obvious cause of these developments is the well-known earthquake(s) that struck central Italy in AD 346 (Galadini and Galli 2004). By the time the eruption hit, the vaulted substructures of the *cavea* had been turned in dwellings and indeed a similar picture has been revealed in the city's *macellum* (Onorato 1960, 28; Lombardo 1977, 814; Tocco Sciarelli 1999, 251).

In the baths, volcanic deposits had already been identified in 2017 (De Simone and Russell 2018). Here they fell directly on the marble floors of the open-air areas, showing that the baths, unlike the theatre, were still functioning right up to AD 472. New work here has expanded the excavated area of the baths and confirmed that the whole complex was refurbished in the 4th century AD, with a new internal configuration, including the addition of new plunge pools, and extensive use of spoliated marble in the flooring of the *frigidarium*, especially its pool. Again, the AD 346 earthquake is likely to have provided the stimulus for this work; we hear of investment in bathing complexes across central Italy in the 4th and 5th centuries AD in response to seismic activity (Ward-Perkins 1984, 20-7; Soricelli 2009, 251-4).

New excavations on the Via Appia and in the area of the forum:

In 2017, the GPR survey in the field east of the baths, at the north end of the site, identified a major north-south road, over 5 m wide, which was assumed to be the Via Appia. In order to test this theory, to explore the road surface, the drains flanking it and the structures opening on to it, a new trench was opened in 2018 across half the width of the feature. As elsewhere at *Aeclanum* the road surface and its adjacent structures had been heavily spoliated but the remains of the preparation of the road surface, still bearing the indents left by the basalt paving stones that originally capped, was well preserved (Fig. 2). While the stone uprights and base of the road's drain had been removed, a stone-built drain with a vaulted top ran between the edge of the road and the front of the structure facing on to the western side of the road, which has the appearance of a row of *tabernae* or perhaps a portico. Again, this structure had been extensively spoliated but those responsible for this work had left traces of their working processes in the form of a small kiln, built into one end of a drainpipe connecting with the drain, within which were found lumps of iron and pieces of lime; this was probably a small separation kiln, used to break up elements and split nails from wood, rather than a full recycling kiln.

Intensive spoliation has also left an indelible mark on the city's forum, as excavations in 2017 on the west side of the complex revealed. The open piazza of the forum was stripped of its paving, potentially as early as the 4th century AD. In 2018, a new trench was opened over the northern end of the forum to explore a semi-circular feature apparent on the GPR and assess the impact of spoliation here. What remains of the foundations of this structure suggest some form of decorative screen or exedra but nothing remains above foundation level. The northern edge of the forum terrace, however, was substantially cut back during excavations in the 1950s or 1960s and this earlier work provided access to much earlier stratigraphic layers. The cleaning of this profile revealed the remains of a mudbrick platform beneath the level of the Roman

forum. A series of post-holes cut into this platform, loom-weights and domestic ceramics indicate that this was a residential structure. The ceramics date to the 3rd or 2nd century BC, making this the earliest building identified at *Aeclanum* to date.

GPR in 2018:

In 2017 the GPR survey identified the area of the forum, confirmed the identification of the theatre and located the line of the road running north-south through the site that has since been shown to be the Via Appia. The good results from the southern ridge of the city, and especially the area of the forum, indicated the further work in this area could be beneficial and in 2018 Dr Guglielmo Strapazzon expanded the area surveyed along the ridge from the forum to the west, focusing especially on the area immediately south of the early Christian basilica. In this area a further two city blocks were identified in the GPR results, aligned with the three found to the west of the forum in 2017. In these blocks the density of structures was less than in the two blocks to the east, with their northern sectors left open; the proximity of these spaces to the church might indicate that these were public or ecclesiastical areas. A large building with a courtyard and apse is also visible in the south-east corner of the fourth city block west of the forum, which again has the appearance of an ecclesiastical structure. Results from earlier excavations around the church showed that this building became the new central point of *Aeclanum*, especially after the AD 472 eruption, and these new GPR results might further show that monumental structures extended to the south and west of the church.

The new excavations and survey at *Aeclanum* continue to add important insights into our understanding of the late antique phases of this strategic city in particular. In the 4th and 5th centuries the city experienced a series of traumas, which had varying impacts on urban life. While the theatre and *macellum* shift from public to private use early in this period, the baths continue to function, and to be expanded and updated, until AD 472. After the eruption the city reformulates itself around its ecclesiastical core, which becomes a new hub in a differently configured late antique city. The discovery of Republican and even pre-Roman layers on the northern edge of the forum, however, shows the hidden potential of the city's earlier cultural heritage.

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Figure captions

Fig. 1: Statue of a cuirassed emperor, probably Domitianic, found in 2007 in the theatre at *Aeclanum* (Auditorium SS. Annunziata, Mirabella Eclano; photo: authors).

Fig. 2: The remains of the Via Appia and the structures to the west of it (photo: authors).